

## Turkey, at a crossroads

By Jean MARSIA, President of the European Society for Defence INPA (S D)

At the S D General Assembly on March 14, one of our members encouraged participants to read Mr. Servent's latest book, *Le monde de demain* (The World of Tomorrow), which I did. Our opinions converge on Russia, China, Turkey, and de Gaulle.

Mr. Servent wrote: "de Gaulle (...) remains in times of darkness an extraordinary fanal. (...) There is no fatality in the domination of barbarism and tyranny. (...) Renunciation and cowardice are not options." <sup>1</sup> Who would say better?

Firmness is exactly the attitude we need to have towards autocrats. Having dealt with the Russian autocrat, then with the Chinese, it remains for me to consider the Turkish.

### Will Mr. Erdođan's chaotic "reign" end in May 2023?

Mr. Erdođan has governed Turkey since 2003, having won ten elections. He was prime minister for ten years and then president for nine years. This populist was able, at first, to rally pious and disadvantaged voters, business circles, Kurds and the disappointed Republican People's Party (CHP) founded by Mustafa Kemal Atat rk, the father of modern Turkey. In 2003, the Christian Democrats, especially the Germans and Belgians, considered him a "Muslim-democrat". They considered welcoming his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the "European People's Party", one of seven political groups in the European Parliament, made up of MEPs from fourteen center-right parties. Six of which call themselves Christian Democrats.

From 2013, Turkish investors began to disinvest. Mr. Erdođan has showed off close to Egypt's Muslim Brothers, which are unfavourable to Western values. His regime has become increasingly intolerant, authoritarian, and imperialist. Things worsened in 2016: a failed or feigned coup d' tat led to the increase of presidential powers, the weakening of the judiciary, the press and parliament, the repression of tens of thousands of opponents, real or perceived, including members of the G len Brotherhood, soldiers, magistrates, teachers and journalists.<sup>2</sup> The number of detainees has doubled in Turkey since 2011, it is the second highest in Europe per thousand inhabitants after Russia and it is triple the European average.

The popularity of Mr. Erdođan has fallen in recent years. Economic growth has become erratic. The welcoming since 2011 of 4 million Syrian refugees despite an unemployment rate of 10% has not pleased. The Kurdish community turned away from him because he treated them badly in Turkey, Iraq and Syria. In 2019, the AKP lost local elections in major cities. Inflation stood at 85.5% per year in November 2022 and 44% per year in April 2023. The Turkish lira lost 80% of its value against the dollar under Erdođan's "reign".

During the February 2023 earthquake, thousands of buildings collapsed, causing an estimated 50,000 deaths. One million inhabitants are displaced. An area the size of Germany is in ruins. Many Turks hold Mr. Erdođan as responsible for this situation. More voters want more effective governance. Due to the bad political and economic situation, the number of young Turks educated in higher education who apply for asylum in Belgium for political reasons has tripled in one year, the number of applications for economic reasons has doubled.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Erdođan blurred his image: he presented himself as the new Sultan or political leader of the Turkic speakers, hence his alliance with Azerbaijan, although of Shiite faith, but also as the

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Servent, *Le monde de demain*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2022, p. 282.

<sup>2</sup> See Charlotte Oberti, "Turquie : la confr rie G len, entre secte et franc-ma onnerie (Turkey: the G len brotherhood, between sect and freemasonry)" in *France24*, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20131227-turquie-confrerie-guelen-entre-secte-franc-maconnerie-erdogan>, 27/12/2013.

<sup>3</sup> See Kubra Mayda, "Aantal Turken dat in Belgi  asiel aanvraagt, is verdrievoudigd" in *From Standaard*, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230508\\_95824900](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230508_95824900), 09/05/2023.

Caliph or religious leader of the Sunnis, neglecting the fact that Sunni Arabs do not envisage Turkish domination, and that the Shiites will not submit to a Sunni.

For the 14 May elections, the opposition candidate, a coalition of six parties, is Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu. He is an economist, a 74-year-old former civil servant, who has led the CHP since 2010. He seems to have won the support of the Kurds. He promised to return to the parliamentary system, which a referendum replaced in 2018 with a presidential system. He wants to fight inflation and restore the course of the Turkish lira. He wants to reduce public spending. He pledged to restore the independence of the judiciary, stop using the judiciary to repress dissent, and restore freedom of expression.

According to a recent poll, Mr K Kılıçdaroğlu rallied 48.9% of the voting intentions.<sup>4</sup> M. Erdoğan would convince 43.2% of voters to vote for him again. The conservative nationalists would get 4.8% for Mr. Ince and 3.1% for Mr Oğan. A second round could be needed at the end of May, for the first time in 20 years.

### **Turkey's soured relationship with the EU**

Turkey has been a candidate for membership of the European Union (EU) unofficially since the 1960s, officially since 1987. In 1999, the EU recognised it as a candidate. Since the coming to power of Mr. Erdoğan in 2003 and Cyprus' entry into the EU in 2004, relations between Turkey and the EU deteriorated. The worsening repression of Kurds since the early 2010s and opponents since 2013, arbitrary purges and imprisonments after the coup d'état in July 2016, military intervention in Syria in 2019, poor governance, sending flows of Syrian refugees and illegal migrants to the EU in 2015 have considerably put away the prospect of Turkey's accession to the EU. The 2016 agreement, which allowed to strongly limit the arrival of migrants in Greece against the payment to Turkey of several billion € was poorly implemented, which sparked resentment.<sup>5</sup> Negotiations on the modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union and its extension to services, as well as accession negotiations, have been frozen by the EU.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the EU remains Turkey's largest trading partner, with 41% of trade, but this share is declining.

Erdoğan threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bulgaria and Greece. He sought to monopolize part of Thrace and some Aegean islands.<sup>7</sup>

The Treaty of Sèvres of 1920, which settled the fate of the Ottoman Empire following its defeat was replaced, following the Greek rout of 1922, by the Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923. This was very advantageous for Turkey and very unfavourable for Greece and Armenia, but it kept most of the Aegean islands in Greece, thus severely restricting the Turkish maritime domain. That is why Mr. Erdoğan disputes this.

In May 2022, Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis warned members of the Senate and House of Representatives in Washington against arms shipments related to the Eastern Mediterranean. According to the Ministry of Defense in Athens, between January and October, 8,880 violations of Greek airspace by Turkish aircraft and drones were recorded, compared to 2,744 in 2021, and just a few hundred in previous years. On both sides of the Evros border river, the state of

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<sup>4</sup> See Jon Henley, "Erdoğan faces real chance of losing as Turkey gets ready to vote" In *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/10/recep-tayyip-erdogan-facies-real-chance-of-losing-as-turkey-gets-ready-to-vote>, 10/5/2023.

<sup>5</sup> See Leonor Hubaut, " Où sont passés les six-milliards promis par l'Europe à la Turquie ? (Where did the six billion promised by Europe to Turkey go?) " in *Bruxelles2*, [https://www.bruxelles2.eu/2020/03/ou-sont-passes-les-six-milliards-promis-par-leurope-a-la-turquie/?utm\\_source=mailpoet&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=les-newsletter-total-derniers-articles-de-notre-blog\\_2](https://www.bruxelles2.eu/2020/03/ou-sont-passes-les-six-milliards-promis-par-leurope-a-la-turquie/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=les-newsletter-total-derniers-articles-de-notre-blog_2), 17/3/2020.

<sup>6</sup> A chapter on financial and budgetary provisions had been opened, as provided for in the migration pact.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Bourcier, Marina Rafenberg, " Entre la Grèce et la Turquie, les tensions s'accroissent (Tensions between Greece and Turkey are rising)" in *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/11/14/entre-la-grece-et-la-turquie-les-tensions-s-accentuent\\_6149805\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/11/14/entre-la-grece-et-la-turquie-les-tensions-s-accentuent_6149805_3210.html), 14/11/2022.

alert is almost permanent. These tensions are cyclical: until March, Mitsotakis and Erdoğan wanted to cooperate more in the war in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

On 3 September 2022, Mr. Erdoğan threatened to strike Athens with the "Tayfun" missile<sup>9</sup> and recalled the Greek defeat of 1922.<sup>10</sup> The High Representative of the EU (HR) restricted himself to calling for the disputes to be settled peacefully.<sup>11</sup>

With an annual budget of 8 billion € Greece spends 3.6% of its GDP on defence. Its forces have 142,000 active and conscripted military personnel, out of a population of 10.6 million. Turkish armies have a budget twice as large and 425,000 active soldiers out of 84 million inhabitants. Both countries have undertaken to modernize their forces, but much remains to be done.<sup>12</sup>

In 1974, following a coup d'état in Cyprus, the Turkish army invaded the north of the island. In 1983, Turkey initiated the creation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, but it was unable to gain international recognition. Mr. Erdoğan refuses to recognise the Republic of Cyprus. He continued the occupation of the north of the island. It is drilling for oil and gas in Cypriot waters. On 17 September 2022, he condemned the lifting of the 1987 US embargo on arms exports to the Republic of Cyprus.

More generally, Mr. Erdoğan does not respect international law. He wants to exploit part of the resources of Greece's exclusive economic zone. In 2019, a first energy agreement was concluded between Turkey and Libya. It set up new maritime borders from southwestern Turkey to northeastern Libya, through an area claimed by Greece and Cyprus. Ankara, which is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, disputes that some Greek islands have exclusive economic zones. This point is a source of contention all the more acute as the Eastern Mediterranean is rich in hydrocarbons. In October 2022, Turkey and Libya signed a memorandum of understanding for hydrocarbon exploration.<sup>13</sup>

While United Nations member states must cooperate in monitoring inspections of the Security Council's arms embargo on Libya, Turkey has repeatedly denied the EU's EUNAVFOR MED IRINI operation permission to board and inspect vessels suspected of violating the United Nations arms embargo on Libya. Without fear of confrontation: the Turkish navy is currently building one hundred patrol boats; this is ten times more than what the French Navy has.

## Turkey and NATO

Turkey has been in NATO since 1952, but its geostrategic positioning has evolved. Long the faithful ally of the United States of America, it now appears as a free electron. Reinforced by a booming and increasingly export-oriented defence industry, symbolized by its flagship product,

<sup>8</sup> See Nicolas Bourcier, Marina Rafenberg, " Entre la Grèce et la Turquie, les tensions s'accroissent (Tensions between Greece and Turkey are rising)" in *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/11/14/entre-la-grece-et-la-turquie-les-tensions-s-accroissent\\_6149805\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/11/14/entre-la-grece-et-la-turquie-les-tensions-s-accroissent_6149805_3210.html), 14/11/2022.

<sup>9</sup> dpa, " Erdogan droht Athen indirekt mit Raketenangriff " in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/erdogan-droht-athen-indirekt-mit-raketenangriff-18527687.html> , 11/12/2022.

<sup>10</sup> See *TRT World*, <https://www.trtworld.com/video/social-videos/erdogan-to-greece-if-you-go-further-you-will-pay-a-heavy-price/63135d2adfcf4c0017524f83S>, sd.

<sup>11</sup> See EEAS Press Team, *Turkey: Statement by the Spokesperson on remarks by the President against Greece*, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/turkey-statement-spokesperson-remarks-president-against-greece\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/turkey-statement-spokesperson-remarks-president-against-greece_en); 05/09/2022.

<sup>12</sup> See sn, " Le français Nexter vise l'acquisition du grec ELVO pour le remplacement du segment médian de l'Armée de Terre hellénique (The French Nexter aims to acquire the Greek ELVO for the replacement of the middle segment of the Hellenic Army " in *Meta-Defense.fr*, <https://meta-defense.fr/2023/04/04/le-francais-nexter-vise-lacquisition-du-grec-elvo-pour-le-remplacement-du-segment-median-de-larmee-de-terre-hellenique/>, 4/4/2023.

<sup>13</sup> See Nicolas Bourcier, Marina Rafenberg, " Entre la Grèce et la Turquie, les tensions s'accroissent (Tensions between Greece and Turkey are rising)" in *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/11/14/entre-la-grece-et-la-turquie-les-tensions-s-accroissent\\_6149805\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/11/14/entre-la-grece-et-la-turquie-les-tensions-s-accroissent_6149805_3210.html), 14/11/2022.

the Bayraktar TB2 drone, Turkey's quest for power is also expressed through military operations and deployments. Ankara is a rival to Russia but has long refused to apply the sanctions decided by the West. However, Turkey's trade data are beginning to reflect the fact that Ankara has stopped allowing the re-export of sanctioned Western products to Russia, after repeated warnings from Washington.<sup>14</sup> In Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans, Turkish soft power follows from economic ties and cultural affinities, whether linguistic, historical, or religious. Mr. Erdoğan claims to be opposed to both the colonialist West and the Russian and Chinese states of prey.

As a result of the acquisition by Mr. Erdoğan, in 2017, of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, in 2020, the Americans sanctioned him: they refused to deliver the F-35 stealth fighters ordered and paid \$ 1.4 billion and withdrew from the Turks the production of 900 parts of the F-35, including the central part of the fuselage. As China tightens its ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is necessary for Washington to consolidate a pro-Western axis including the Gulf countries, Egypt and Israel, as well as to anchor Turkey to it. Mr. Erdoğan understood this. He asked the United States of America to modernize 80 F-16s and provide him with 40 latest-generation F-16 fighters,<sup>15</sup> which Mr. Biden has authorized, subject to congressional approval, which awaits Sweden's entry into NATO.<sup>16</sup>

The pusillanimity of NATO and EU leaders in the face of Mr. Erdoğan, who is preventing even assistance to the Syrians affected by the recent earthquake, is heartbreaking.<sup>17</sup> On 29 June 2022, Mr. Erdoğan made it conditional on the ratification of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, notably on Sweden's extradition of 73 Kurds and supporters of Mr. Gülen. The leaders of Finland and Sweden have vowed not to support Kurdish resistance movements or Gülen's supporters. The two Nordic countries lifted in October 2022 the bans on the export of certain weapons to Turkey, which sanctioned the Turkish military aggression against Kurdish forces in northern Syria in 2019; these were our allies in the fight against Daesh. As Sweden refuses to comply with Ankara's demands on extradition, only Finland's accession has been ratified by Ankara. Sweden has unsuccessfully amended its constitution to toughen its anti-terrorism laws.<sup>18</sup>

The question of Sweden's security is not an issue: it is guaranteed by Article 42.7 of the EU Treaty and indirectly by Article V of the Washington Treaty, because 23 EU Member States are members of NATO.<sup>19</sup>

## Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine

<sup>14</sup> sn, " Russia-Ukraine war at a glance: what we know on day 434 of the invasion " in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/03/russia-ukraine-war-at-a-glance-what-we-know-on-day-434-of-the-invasion>, 3/5/2023.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Wintour, "Erdoğan gains from lifting Sweden and Finland Nato veto with US fighter jet promise" in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/29/erdogan-gains-from-lifting-sweden-and-finland-nato-veto-with-us-fighter-jet-promise>, 29/6/2022.

<sup>16</sup> Rainer Hermann, "Die Türkei besinnt sich auf ihre Verankerung im Westen" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/russlands-ukraine-krieg-hat-folgen-fuer-die-tuerkische-aussenpolitik-17964258.html>, 19/4/2022.

<sup>17</sup> According to Pierre Servent, *Le monde de demain*, op.cit, p. 206, M. Erdoğan has not recognized Putin's annexation of Crimea, he has supplied Bayraktar drones to Ukraine, but continues to trade with Russia. He has put the judiciary and the Central Bank at the behest of the government, muzzled the press, civil society and the military, and enriched the oligarchs devoted to him. He imprisons opponents, especially Kurds. Because of the absurd monetary policy he conducts, inflation would have been 79% in July 2022.

<sup>18</sup> See Ruth Michaelson, "Turkey pushes back vote on Sweden and Finland's Nato accession" In *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/14/turkey-pushes-back-vote-on-sweden-and-finlands-nato-accession>, 14/1/2023.

<sup>19</sup> [https://club.bruxelles2.eu/2022/05/carnet-de-la-geopolitique-europeenne-17-05-2022-defense-otan-diplomatie-crises-securite-pouvoirs/?utm\\_source=mailpoet&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=b2pro-or-newsletter-post-title\\_2](https://club.bruxelles2.eu/2022/05/carnet-de-la-geopolitique-europeenne-17-05-2022-defense-otan-diplomatie-crises-securite-pouvoirs/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=b2pro-or-newsletter-post-title_2), 17/5/2022.

Turkey depends on Russia for energy, wheat, steel, tourists, ... That didn't stop Mr. Erdoğan to help Ukraine by banning the passage through the straits of Russian ships from the Northern and Pacific fleets to reinforce the Black Sea Fleet. He has provided many combat drones to Ukraine. The drone manufacturer Baykar Technology has a research centre and assembly line for TB2 drones and the new Akinci model, which is equipped with a Ukrainian engine. M. Erdoğan has also helped Ukraine resume food exports.

### **The crossroads**

On 14 May, Turks began to choose what they wanted to be: either subject to an aggressive one-man regime, where dissent is absent, the economy is sluggish and corruption is growing, or members of a democracy in which the People are sovereign. The centenary of the Turkish Republic could coincide with a return to the values that were those of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.